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ABSTRACT

Those who teach in the field of English and the language arts have seen their subject and their teaching enter the discourse of politics and become the topoi for popular discussions about the crisis in public education--they find themselves caught in a rising tide of public opinion against what they stand for intellectually and professionally. What is needed is a greater separation between school and state and the emancipation of education from the arbitrariness of political pressures. Schools, like religion and the press, need the protection of something like a Constitutional amendment to keep education free of interference in matters of materials, methods, and curriculum from the winds of political change and the "passing hysterias of public opinion." To build public confidence in the profession of teaching, English and language arts educators need to exercise their professional responsibilities even more demonstrably than they demand their professional rights and protections. They should communicate with their legislators to represent their opposition to laws that would interfere with the right of educators to engage in their professional work according to standards set within their profession. Professional organizations like the National Council of Teachers of English have been strong advocates for and must continue to promote intellectually rigorous and academically relevant requirements for the certification of classroom teachers, just as they must continue to advocate strong, high-quality professional development programs to enhance the expertise of all teachers in classrooms. (RS)

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Toward the Separation of School and State

by NCTE President Sheridan Blau, University of California, Santa Barbara

My Antipathy for Political Discourse

Like many English teachers of my generation -- a generation that graduated from college after the intellectual and ethical atrocities of the McCarthy era but before the Peace Corps and the anti-war marches on Chicago and Washington -- I don't like to talk much about politics. Aside from what I believe to be a healthy distrust and distaste for political discourse, I find events on the political scene trivial compared to the consequential matters that are at issue in moral discourse or the discourse of literature. Poetry, Ezra Pound insisted -- Ezra Pound, who was wise about poetry but foolish about politics -- "Poetry," he said, "is news that stays news." Political goings on are news but, unlike literature, news fittingly reported in the daily newspaper and just as fittingly discarded with the daily trash. The discourse of politics is no more likely to offer us wisdom for life than the discourse of the popular or fashionable. For political opinion like public opinion in general, is often fickle, subject to manipulation by the media or else designed to do the manipulating,, and frequently -- always in the case of mobs and groups of extreme partisans -- not subject to governance by reason, rules of consistency, or reflection.

The Current Scene in the Politics of Education

Yet those of us who teach in the field of English and the language arts have lately seen our subject and our teaching enter the discourse of politics and become the topoi for popular discussions about the crisis in public education (a crisis that

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some of our most thoughtful colleagues have demonstrated was largely invented by the popular press) so much so that we find ourselves caught in a tide of public opinion that is rising against much of what we stand for intellectually and professionally. Nor is there any shortage of politicians with fingers poised on the public pulse, ready to turn popular prejudice into public policy, especially if they can do so in the name of reliable, replicable scientific research. Such challenges require us to abandon our diffidence and, however reluctantly, address the political issues.

In state houses, in local school boards, and in Congress legislators and other policy makers are busy trying to rescue American education by mandating how children should be taught reading, what bodies of research should inform teaching practice in the teaching of reading, and who should be allowed to teach reading teachers and prospective teachers. California has adopted legislation (already successfully copied in the House of Representatives) that would fund inservice programs only when the providers of inservice pass tests -- not of their academic credentials --but of their subscription to certain acceptable theories of learning, research findings, and instructional practices, forsaking all alternative theories, bodies of research, and unapproved practitioners of research and instruction.

Such legislation serves not merely to privilege particular versions of science and scientific truth over others, but to suppress or disenfranchise alternative accounts of what is true and to discount entirely all research or evidence that derives from research methodologies that do not fit a reductivist, positivist, quantifiable, behaviorist version of scientific research. In the name of education and science, policy makers and a few of their scientific cronies (most of whom appear to be financially linked to textbooks and publishing companies whose reading programs claim to be based on quantifiable research) are conducting a campaign for intellectual control and the repression of alternative views that not only threatens the principle of academic freedom, but stands opposed to the true aims of science and

education themselves. Intellectual suppression can produce only false knowledge (a knowledge that prevents further learning) and a science that substitutes the idolatry of orthodox belief and political expediency for fidelity to the disinterested advancement of learning.

If political history and the history of ideas in the western literary and religious traditions teach us anything, it is to distrust those who not only claim to own the exclusive truth, but who insist further on suppressing or punishing all messengers of alternative versions of truth. One of the surest signs of false science has always been its attempt to suppress the arguments and research of those who would challenge its conclusions. Another has been its alignment with sources of political power from which the suppression of alternative ideas always flows. Think of the political figures and governments of the past that have embraced one group of scientists to the exclusion of all others and you will have a catalogue of demagogues and shameful public policies that have used science to justify slavery, racism, genocide, the incarceration of dissidents in mental hospitals, and a host of other injustices.

But let us not overstate the case. Can government agencies and policy makers really be accused of suppressing ethnographic research, case study research and most teacher-research -- virtually all qualitative research -- merely by deciding that the only fundable inservice programs are those based on quantitative, behaviorist, research (which is what the California legislature has done and the House of Representatives has approved in House bill HR 2614)? Only if the prejudice of government policy-makers translates into diminished opportunities for certain researchers and research-based programs to find support and obtain a hearing within the educational community. And that, of course, is precisely what is happening, quite aside from the diminished opportunities that are legislatively mandated for politically unacceptable researchers and curriculum specialists. With stories that remind us eerily of the red-baiting days of the 50s we now hear regularly of incidents like one recently reported on E-mail networks about a small

Central California town in which the superintendent of schools canceled a scheduled presentation by a leading language arts researcher (whose publications are widely respected) merely because a couple of teachers complained that she was "too whole language." The superintendent claimed that he didn't know anything about the speaker he had canceled, but the accusation about her professional affiliation was enough for him to withdraw an invitation, to break a contract, to suppress the dissemination of findings from a professionally respectable line of research.

The Professional Debate Vs the Political Debate

Let us be clear about what we stand for and oppose. As a profession and professional organization we are not combatants -- despite the desire of journalists -- in any war between the proponents of a whole language approach to literacy and a phonics-based approach. Researchers and practitioners who are experts (as I am not) from both sides of this artificial divide demonstrate in most of their writing and presentations that they represent different emphases and different research traditions in a field that can accommodate and benefit from a variety of research perspectives and a rich variety of instructional approaches. Responsible researchers and teachers who tend to favor either school of thought regularly employ methods and findings identified with the other.

In a responsible and responsive professional community we will find teachers consulting research and employing teaching strategies that work effectively for the particular children they teach. Shelly Harwayne, principal of the Manhattan New School, a public elementary school in the heart of New York City, reports that she is often asked, especially by the press, whether her award-winning inner-city school is a whole language school or a phonics school. She invites the press to visit and they, after visiting classes and finding they are still unable to determine if it is a whole language or phonics school, ask her again: "what kind of reading program does this school have?" Her answer is that if she has 40 children in her school who need

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special help in learning to read, then she has 40 reading programs, each one identified by the name of a child and each one drawing what is most needed by a particular child from whatever bodies of research and teaching strategies happen to work most effectively for this particular child at this particular moment.

Our profession as seen from inside teachers lounges and in the conversations of professionals and in the presentations and workshops at conferences such as this one is not a bloody battleground of competing ideas, but it has been made to appear so by a press hungry for dramatic stories and by impatient policy makers and a frustrated public looking for the same kind of simple answers that popular opinion often demands --answers that offer scapegoats and saviors. In such a climate of public opinion we should not be surprised to see legislation attempting to mandate what has been touted as saving instruction based on what has been advertised as "reliable, scientific" research and discounting if not outlawing the instructional methods and research studies mistakenly associated with a perceived, though mythical, failure. The true ideological battleground for our profession, then, is not in the field where teacher-educators and teachers debate about the most effective teaching strategies nor in the labs and research sites where scholars offer different theoretical perspectives, different methodological procedures, and competing findings. Disagreements in these arenas can and do lead to dialogue and thereby to the advancement of learning.

The battleground on which we are obliged to make our stand is the political battleground where we are losing ground to policy makers and legislators who seek to usurp the professional authority that belongs to teachers and professional educators in matters having to do with curriculum, teaching methodology, and materials. What business do legislators in California or in Congress have in deciding on an approved curriculum for inservice programs for teachers of reading? What moral or ethical or intellectual justification can they offer for arrogating to

themselves the authority to declare with respect to a field of specialized learning that one research paradigm and one set of research findings is valid and all others invalid, when the world's most widely respected and most extensively published scholars in the field are engaged in a continuing scholarly debate on those very questions?

Collegial Responsibility

That legislators have been encouraged by a handful of reading researchers to act with such usurpacious arrogance is much to the discredit of those researchers, though it may testify more to their naivete than their vulnerability to the attractions of power or the temptations of consulting fees and royalties. Yet surely they must see or we must ask them to recognize that there is something deeply wrong professionally and ethically when one group of researchers in an academic field supports a congressional bill that declares other respected scholars in the field -- including many of the most distinguished and revered figures in literacy studies -- figures like Shirley Brice Heath and Judith Green and Gordon Wells -- scholars whose work has appeared in our most distinguished journals -- unacceptable as sources of knowledge or expertise. As a matter of principle, having to do with academic freedom (not to mention respect for colleagues) all scholars in the field of literacy studies, no matter what research paradigms or teaching practices they subscribe to must stand together and call in one voice for the deletion of any clause in any piece of legislation that has the effect of declaring any group of professionally respected scholars as not deserving of professional respect or attention by virtue of their intellectual orientation. If ethnographic researchers and constructivist theories of learning can be stigmatized today, then behaviorists can be stigmatized tomorrow.

The same arguments that apply to colleagues who are close to the seats of current political power must also, of course, apply to the rest of us who wield other sorts of power. The officers and staff and program organizers of NCTE and other professional organizations in the language arts must be scrupulous not to exercise power in

program planning or publication decisions that will have the effect of marginalizing or discounting quantitative research or findings that favor skill oriented instruction over a more constructivist model or any intellectually responsible group of researchers merely because of their scholarly orientation. The rule of charity and collegial respect must apply to all members of the academic community. We must all resist any official or tacit policy that declares any school of professionally respectable scholarship (by which I mean work supported by professional associations and published in scholarly journals and so on) as officially incorrect. That is the road to totalitarian thinking whether on the left or right.

How Can We Respond to Current Political Outrages

How can we respond to the misdirected policies enacted or threatened by presumably well-meaning legislatures or to the misguided understanding represented by popular opinion? Surely, we can and must communicate with our legislators to represent our opposition to laws that would interfere with the right of educators to engage in their professional work according to standards set within their profession. We can also write letters to editors and speak out clearly at public forums. It is a fact that even a little bit of lobbying can make a difference in shaping policy; and that in many states, if not in the federal government, policy is presently being shaped largely by the efforts of pressure groups who represent a narrow and repressive conception of learning -- what Freire called the banking model -- and with a matching view of reading as nothing more than pronunciation and information retrieval. In the meantime, a more literate public and the professional community in education remain largely silent, disheartened by the drift of political opinion, and feeling, as the not silent Ken Goodman has described it, alluding to a story he has circulated on E-mail networks, that in such a climate of repression "we have to learn to live under water."

But why as a profession (though with notable exceptions) are we-- and especially those of us

who are specialists in the arts of language --as silent as we have been? What are teachers doing while the representatives of educational Gradgrindism and cultural paranoia appear to be controlling public discourse? They are teaching , of course. If we are middle school or secondary school English teachers, we are teaching 150 to 200 students each day, assigning them papers to write that we must read and respond to, preparing lessons, reading professional journals, re-reading the literature we must teach and other literature we might want to teach, attending faculty meetings, meeting with parents, supervising student publications, and perhaps spending some time with our own families. If we are elementary teachers, we are lucky to have a bathroom break all day, and our day will probably start early and end late for the hours of preparation and inservice that are required of us to prepare lessons for children at various levels of skill and keep ourselves current on teaching theory and methods and materials in everybody else's academic specialty. No group of professionals works harder than good teachers do. To ask them as well to become active political lobbyists so that they might resist one more attempt at telling them how to carry out their professional responsibilities seems almost obscene.

Good teachers know, furthermore, that we have always had to live under water. The current repressive cycle in education is merely another cycle that will pass and good teachers will go on struggling , in spite of institutional obstacles, to do what in their professional judgment is best for their students. Even in what might be seen as a permissive rather than a repressive political climate, good teachers have had to live under water. The Superintendent who this year banned an inservice program because someone had suggested that it was too whole language, a few years ago would have banned the teaching of the alphabet or any kind of teaching of spelling or vocabulary as many administrators apparently did in California in that state's prior incarnation as a state that embraced a constructivist model of learning.

Top down directions for professional teachers --

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no matter how well-intended or how solidly based on theory -- will not work and are almost guaranteed to be intellectually reductive and pedagogically simplistic. No formula for teaching can be allowed to substitute for a teacher's own professional judgment exercised in the context of a particular classroom with particular students at particular moments. What we need from school boards and state and federal education agencies, is not better models of teaching and learning to be dictated to teachers, but more respect for the professional judgment of classroom teachers and the funds to provide teachers with time and resources for participating in intensive and intellectually powerful professional development programs that are built on respect for teachers as well as respect for research, which is to say all professionally honored research.

If as a profession we must lobby our legislatures, let us lobby for the right of teachers to practice their profession without the interference of non-educators in matters of curriculum, teaching methods, and materials or research methodologies. Let policy makers, including legislatures and school boards set general goals for public schools defined perhaps by some vision of an educated citizenry and then let them provide schools with adequate material resources to do the job of helping students acquire such an education. Let them protect teachers and schools against the fickleness of public opinion and the partisanship of political pressure groups rather than subject education to their intellectually capricious tyranny.

The genius of our Constitution and Bill of Rights, I suspect, resides less in how they institutionalize the principle of democratic elections and majority rule (which characterized many earlier governments including some of the Swiss cantons of the sixteenth and seventeenth century) than in the permanent protections they offer to minorities and to individuals and institutions against the changeable will of the majority. Thus religion is protected from government interference and so is the press, no matter how displeased the majority of voters or their representatives might become with the way churches and the press conduct their

activities.

The American system of public education seems to me no less critical to the health of the nation than the institution of a free press. Nor does it seem to me any less in need of protection against well- intentioned legislators and misguided majorities that would seek to serve their own political or ideological ends through the control of curricular content, teaching methods or texts. Indeed, in recent years we have seen processes as basic as textbook selection in many cities and states become political spectacles featuring power contests between various groups of parents and political stakeholders rather than thoughtful processes of deliberation among professionals about the materials that would most effectively serve legitimate educational aims. It is time to rescue education from the politicians who are endlessly seeking to save it and from the fickle fashions of public opinion. It is time to offer to schools and to teachers something like constitutional protections so that they may work in the service of a well-informed professional vision without being subject to sabotage at every turn by the latest fetish of one or another political party or pressure group.

This does not mean that educators should not be accountable to the publics they serve. Protecting educators from interference from school boards and legislatures would in fact make them more rather than less accountable to the public and to the elected but changing bodies that fund and therefore will always constrain what schools can do. Presently legislative bodies and elected boards of education with members who serve for a few years hold enormous authority to dictate policy and practices but are rarely in office to be held accountable when the results of failed policies finally become evident. And almost all policies created in response to popular fashions eventually do fail.

Later this year NCTE plans to join with a number of other professional organizations in a Congress on Public Education. Let us propose that the agenda for this congress include discussion of the problem of how to balance the responsibility of

legislatures and school boards to oversee education with their equal responsibility to protect education from becoming a hostage in ideological and political battles. Let us specifically explore mechanisms, including legislation, to protect schools from the sort of legislative and public interference that has created such uncertainty and so threatened both the richest traditions and the most intellectually progressive ideas in public education. If it seems doubtful that our richest traditions could be in jeopardy (along with our most progressive ideas) visit Florida, where legislators and other policy makers are proposing in the name of educational utility the marginalization of literary study, so that literature will be taught only in elective classes, while required English classes focus only on reading practical texts like warrantees, scientific reports, and directions.

Will our next political campaign have to be in Florida to stop legislators from enacting a policy that could be supported only by persons with extremely limited experiences with literature and little understanding of the nature of literary study? That such semi-literate persons, however well-intentioned or morally upright, could be in a position to dictate curriculum or educational policy in English studies is a perversion of democratic principles and an absurdity of the kind that a Renaissance rhetorician might refer to as an outrage against nature -- equivalent to the idea that the foot should rule the head or that "the bounded waters should lift their bosoms higher than the shores ... and the rude son should strike his father dead."

I had thought for a time to suggest that NCTE actually initiate a campaign for a Constitutional Amendment to be known as the Academic Freedom Amendment. And I do want to put the idea on the table as a proposal for some distant and utopian future, a consummation devoutly to be wished, perhaps, yet so implausible a goal in our own time as to commend itself only to our imaginations. Nevertheless, we can and should at this time of an approaching new millennium make a case to responsible and thoughtful legislators in state and federal bodies for some mechanism that

would allow education to operate in a zone more free of political interference than is now our sorry condition.

In the meantime, we can all take heart from noting that NCTE has launched what we are calling a Reading Research Strike Force consisting of some 15 internationally respected scholars who will be issuing White Papers and preparing briefing documents in response to distorted accounts of scientific research that have been widely circulated by lobbyists who speak for various political and ideological pressure groups. Our straight -talking and illuminating documents will be widely available to classroom teachers for use in local schools and communities. It is also the case that even as we speak two important documents are being released from two different federally funded research groups that seriously challenge and even discredit many of the conclusions drawn by phonics crazed policy makers based on NICHD research and specifically on the widely circulated report synthesizing 30 years of NICHD research -- a report that has powerfully influenced the intrusive and misguided reading policies adopted in California, Texas, and the House of Representatives.

What changes in political opinion might follow upon strong research reports calling into question the research upon which politicians and much of the public have mounted their calls for repressive reforms? Would it be reasonable to assume that the growing number of studies discrediting the research base for educationally intrusive legislation on reading will now lead political leaders to acknowledge that they might have been guilty of premature legislation or that in future it might be wiser to protect schools and teachers from politically charged intrusions rather than try to regulate them legislatively in matters of teaching methods and materials? It is doubtful that any such concession will be forthcoming. Yet the new studies may be preparing the way for a political sea change in which those who have been living under water may be able to surface for a short breath of fresh air.

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Additional Arguments for the Separation of School and State

Sheridan Blau

In my inaugural [Convention] address I called for a greater separation between school and state and the emancipation of education from the arbitrariness of political pressures.

I advanced the idea that schools, like religion and the press, needed the protection of something like a Constitutional amendment to keep education free of interference in matters of materials, methods, and curriculum from the winds of political change a nd the passing hysterias of public opinion.

However much we may wish for such protections, of course, we can only hope to achieve them-by law or by custom- if we are first able to win the confidence of the public and of politicians in the professionalism and expertise of educators and in the capaci ty of teachers to make professional judgments that represent the interests of students and the enterprise of learning rather than the mere material interests of teachers themselves.

To build public confidence in the profession of teaching, in other words, we need to exercise our professional responsibilities even more demonstrably than we demand our professional rights and protections.

Those responsibilities include maintaining a system of professional supervision that assures that all teachers are academically qualified by degrees, licenses, and credentials to teach at the levels and in the fields to which they are assigned and that th e programs that award teachers their degrees and credentials are sufficiently rigorous and relevant to assure the public that a properly

credentialed teacher is in fact likely to be qualified to serve as a teaching practitioner.

Such assurances appear not to be available. Thus politicians and public pressure groups in an age of manufactured educational crises can claim that they are required in the interest of education and children to rescue public schools from the imagined inc ompetence or unprofessionalism of teachers.

Yet even the problem of uncredentialed teachers that is so often cited by politicians and school boards as an excuse for their presumptuous meddling in matters that are properly the province of professional educators is itself created by those politicians and school boards. No faculty group or professional association of teaching specialists in any field or at any level has to my knowledge ever advocated the relaxation of standards or the waiver of licenses for persons assigned to teach in a specialized f ield.

The statistics on how many teachers nationwide are not qualified to teach the academic subjects they are assigned should concern the taxpaying public just as it concerns and outrages most teachers and most members of professional organizations like NCTE.

But what we must point out to that public and to the politicians that serve it, is that unlicensed and ill-prepared teachers occupy classrooms not because the teaching profession or teacher educators put them there but because politicians and elected scho ol boards in the name of expediency and economy (not in the interest of children or education) created waiver programs and systems of exemptions that would allow and require school administrators to hire and assign unlicensed and unqualified teachers in t he absence of and even in preference to properly qualified professionals.

Thus the problem of unqualified teachers in classrooms is merely another instance of how schools and student learning have been compromised by the usurpation on the part of politicians, school boards, and other

policymakers, who are themselves not academ ic professionals, of the authority that properly belongs to professionals in such matters as the assignment of classes and the evaluation of academic preparation.

Professional organizations like NCTE, in the meantime, have been strong advocates for and must continue to promote intellectually rigorous and academically relevant requirements for the certification of classroom teachers, just as we must continue to advo cate strong, high-quality professional development programs to enhance the expertise of all teachers in classrooms.

We must also become even more intimate partners than we have been with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in its effort to provide advanced professional certification for experienced classroom teachers. We must serve that partnership, moreover, by exercising vigilance so that definitions of teacher expertise and professional knowledge will continue to be determined through a process of responsible professional dialogue and that they do not become compromised by political exigencies o r the improperly persuasive power of governmental funding agencies.

Sheridan Blau is NCTE President and professor of English and education at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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